



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Fitzcarraldo* by Werner Herzog; Herzog Stipetic; Lucki Stipetic  
Todd Gitlin

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a cessation of the terribly bloody riots between the Hindus and the Muslims just after partition. Fasts were a compelling weapon that Gandhi often used to bring back sanity to peoples' enflamed thoughts and emotions, to make them face new concepts and most importantly, to make them atone for their lapses, thereby saving the lives of thousands of innocent human beings who might have been slaughtered in the white heat of communal hatred.

Attenborough turns Gandhi's exercise into a ritual of baths. As Gandhi lies, crumpled and sad on his little cot, an impoverished Hindu (Om Puri) whose son has been butchered by the Muslims bursts on the scene, throws a piece of bread on Gandhi and hysterically admonishes him to "Eat! Eat!" Gandhi's reaction is to give a severe lecture to the unfortunate Hindu, telling him that he will only eat his bread if the other man promises to adopt a Muslim child as his new son, at which moment the Hindu breaks down and cries. To crude farce is now added unabashed sentimentality as the rest of the sullen Muslim detractors, also present, drop their weapons as though on cue.

What saves such scenes, and many others in the film, is the wonderful performance of Ben Kingsley in the title role. The metamorphosis that he achieves from the frock-coated lawyer of South Africa to the "half-naked fakir" of the Mahatma in India is extraordinary. Kingsley's artistry carries with it a wonderful sense of responsibility. He recreates very movingly Gandhi's complete rejection of Westernization once his ideology and goal had crystallized themselves in his soul. To take the soul into the most difficult realm of absolute simplicity is not an easy task. Gandhi's rejection was much more than the simple exchange of symbols—a khadi-spun cloth from frock-coat, hat and golden buttons. This change, as Kingsley portrays it, radiates itself through his changing *being*. It is not an old skin which is shed. It is the inner sanctity of an extraordinary man that Kingsley makes so marvellously luminous. His eyes, shining through tiny grandfather spectacles, his bewitching smile, his vocabulary, rolling with India's diverse speech rhythms and singsong cadences emerges as superb transformations. The British accent of his South African up-

bringing gradually disappears. The clipped English sense of humor takes on gleeful Indian tones of mischief. The small compact body with the healthy cheeks and abundant hair of the successful lawyer gradually shrinks and becomes emaciated as the burden of a huge Indian continent falls across its narrow frame. It is *for* this and *in* this alone that Kingsley has been successful in *his* personal homage to the Mahatma. His contribution, so clearly isolated from Attenborough's hype and simplification, shows resoundingly an actor's overwhelming triumph over a director's repeated failure to come to terms with his subject.

—DARIUS COOPER

## NOTE

1. Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1958) pp. vi-vii.

## FITZCARRALDO

Written and directed by Werner Herzog. Camera: Thom Mauch. Music: Popul Voh, Enrico Caruso, Richard Strauss. Produced by Herzog and Lucki Stipetic. New World Pictures.

*Fitzcarraldo*—the film, not the mystique—was the victim of an excess of prior publicity. The film was heralded by years of bad news, generating cineastic legend. Just to name the highlights, or lowlights: after rumors spread that Werner Herzog was going to work them to the bone and steal their land, even boil them down into lard, angry Amazonian Indians drove him and his crew from their first encampment. Jack Nicholson and Warren Oates fell through as stars of choice; their excellent replacement, Jason Robards, took sick with dysentery, and had to withdraw after considerable film had already been shot. His co-star, Mick Jagger, also withdrew to meet prior obligations, and Herzog decided to write his character out of the script altogether. With the biggest box-office draws gone, financing began to fall apart. Eventually Herzog turned to Klaus Kinski to play the Irishman Fitzcarraldo, and moved his entire operation 1500 miles into the jungle to stimulate the edginess of his actors. The rainy season was unusually intense, unusually long. Passing through territory controlled by another tribe of Indians, crew members were attacked and wounded by arrows.

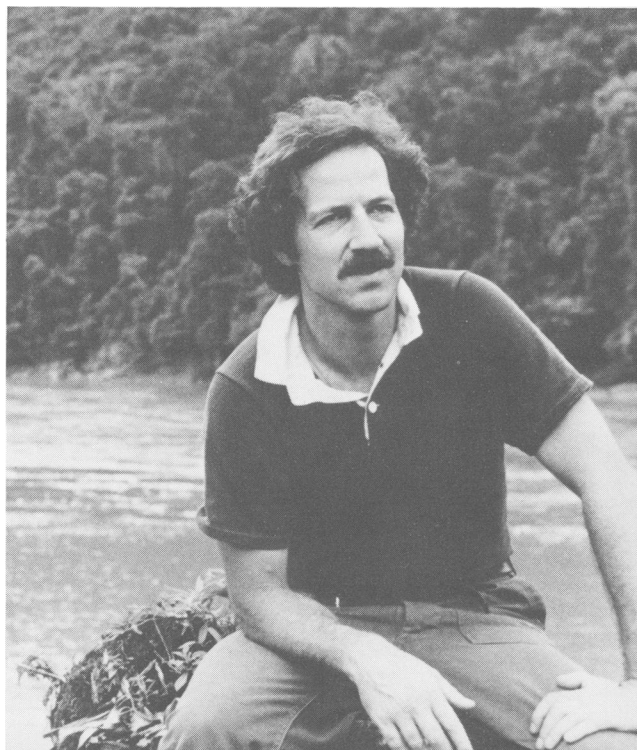
Herzog's agon continued to play out a double mystique, blending the imperial adventures of the sixteenth century with Romantic dreams of the nineteenth. To advance so deeply into the jungle, the wasteland, the bush, to hack some lasting good out of the harsh Otherness of Nature, the twentieth-century cultural conquistador had to pay the price for his hubris. Worse yet, the crew and the Indians had to pay it too, laboring under the burden of Werner Herzog's dreams. And curiously, only that price seemed to confirm that the adventure was right and worthwhile in the first place. (German Romantics know that the magnitude of the ordeal is pure testimony to the value of the objective.) The historical Fitzcarrald, called Fitzcarraldo, wanted to build an opera house in the Amazon rubber-boom town of Iquitos so that his hero, Caruso, could be induced to visit. He would pay for this exercise in Kultur and enlightenment by hauling a dismantled steamboat over a mountain between two river systems, enabling him to get around an otherwise impassable rapids. He hired hundreds of Indians to dismantle and transport the boat, then reassemble it below the rapids to get the jump on a previously undeveloped rubber business. Herzog went Fitzcarraldo one better. *His* Indians would haul *his* steamboat over the mountain intact. It would weight ten times Fitzcarraldo's, and they would put it up a grade twice as steep as Fitzcarraldo's, 40 degrees—over oozing mud, no less, as it turned out. They used a specially installed winch and pulley system designed to pull much less weight at a much less steep angle. When Herzog insisted on going ahead, the Brazilian engineer who had designed and installed the system quit, telling him it was reckless, with a solid chance that someone would die in the attempt. During the actual haul, a cable did snap, though miraculously no one was killed. Pauline Kael later wrote in *The New Yorker* that Herzog had risked lives just to get a real-life shot of the boat filling the diagonal of his frame.

Truly this saga seemed German Romanticism run amok, imperial conquest stuck in the mud and hell-bent on storming its way through to the other side. Herzog seemed to have been transmuted into his own wrathful Aguirre, bound for dubious glory as he marched lesser beings into the desolate night of his all-

or-nothing vision. Beneath the distracted visage of Kinski's Fitzcarraldo could be detected the monstrous goggle eyes of Kinski's *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, dragging his own conquistadorial crew to destruction in the name of some unspeakable lust of the blood, some crazed compulsion to drive his spirit beyond civilization. With all this, it seemed Herzog's film was bound to disappear beneath the enormity of his own living legend.

And to make matters worse for Herzog, by the time *Fitzcarraldo* got onto the American screen, Les Blank's fine documentary *Burden of Dreams*—the title of which I've already referred to in passing—had already played several major cities; an earlier version had been shown on public television. Not only did Blank catch Herzog's catastrophes on camera, but he caught Herzog himself in his full darkness. In one memorable sequence, late in the film, Herzog fulminates against the very Nature he went halfway around the world to find. Just as the Romantic identifies with Nature's unspoiled qualities, its wildness or peace, now the thwarted Herzog inverts the image, and some decidedly unpretty themes leap out of the German past: "I see fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival and growing and rotting. The trees here are in misery. The birds here are in misery—they don't sing, they just shriek in pain.

BURDEN OF DREAMS: *Herzog in the jungle*



Erotic? No! There is an overwhelming fornication! There is a curse on this landscape, and whoever goes too deep into it has a share of this curse! We are cursed for what we are doing here! It is a land that god, if He exists, has created in anger! There is no order here, no harmony in the universe! The only harmony is of overwhelming, collective murder! It is a vile, base obscenity! We don't belong here! There is an overwhelming lack of order! Even the stars here are a mess. They have no constellations. They just have chaos. There is no harmony! I hate it!"

Thus does the defeated Romantic surrender to his underside, and the worst of it is that Herzog doesn't know he's inveighing against the negative image of a Paradise he carried in his own heart—the projected Mother turned Monster. Onto the wildness of Nature he projects the raging chaos of his own heart, the disorder of his own desires. But despite this self-revelation, or because of it, *Burden of Dreams* remains a tribute to Herzog, in the end, because it honors and recapitulates Herzog's project by plunging deep into the jungle to record its ordeal. Despite obvious differences between the two film-makers, Les Blank is to Herzog as Herzog is to the historical Fitzcarraldo: a devoted though distanced tributary. After seeing *Burden of Dreams* and watching Herzog's agon unfold, it was easy to expect that *Fitzcarraldo* would prove anticlimactic.

Several critics found it so, and worse. Pauline Kael denounced Herzog not only for "playing Pharaoh" but making a dull, flat movie to boot. To the contrary, I found the film enormously exciting, gorgeous, moving, mysterious, and—despite certain improbabilities of plot and character—thought-provoking. This is not to say that *Fitzcarraldo* was "worth" the dangers to which Herzog made his cast and crew submit; such a cost-benefit calculus is beyond my ken. But there is a single element that, to me, summarizes *Fitzcarraldo*'s achievement and lifts the film beyond the fascination of the story of its making. It's the ending of the film, neglected by the reviews, which carries a meaning that transcends Herzog's agon and its moral ambiguities.

To recapitulate *Fitzcarraldo*'s plot-line now would be redundant and useless. It would only bore people who've seen the film, and couldn't

perform any useful service for people who haven't and might want to, since the film is no longer in general release. But the essential points are simple to recite. To realize his wild vision, Fitzcarraldo drives the Indians beyond endurance. Believing him to be their long-promised White God, they go along with the ordeal. But once the boat is hauled over the mountain, the Indians have other ideas. Before Fitzcarraldo has a chance to exploit the rubber which was the object of the whole voyage, the Indians cut the boat loose and it careens into the very rapids which the whole venture was meant to avoid. The boat survives, terribly battered, but now it is back below the rapids—without rubber, without capital. Herzog's original story for *Fitzcarraldo* (Fjord Press, San Francisco, \$8.00) says: "And as the boat drifts towards us, having survived the inferno, we have time to let a terrible thought germinate . . . *everything was to no avail* . . . The dream is over, all was in vain. In a single night, eight months of exertion are rendered null and void."

But what, then, is the point of *Herzog's* story? What meaning can Fitzcarraldo find in this catastrophe? It turns out that all the while Fitzcarraldo was running the expedition to the tune of his dream, the Indians were pursuing their own dream-script. "They say they always knew our boat, the divine vessel, was only dragged over the mountain so it could drift through the rapids," the captain tells Fitzcarraldo. "They say it was necessary, that they had been waiting for this since the time of their forefathers, it was necessary to reconcile the evil spirits of the rapids."

The conquistador has met his match; he has defeated nature but been defeated nevertheless. Momentarily, he's crushed. But Fitzcarraldo rises to the occasion just as Herzog had to. Back in Iquitos, Fitzcarraldo learns that a European opera company is giving a performance nearby! Then comes his flash of inspiration, which is also Herzog's way of redeeming his ordeal and making sense of it. In the lavish, sensuous closing scene, as the entire population gathers at the waterfront in amazement and pleasure, he stages a one-time-only performance of Bellini's *I Puritani*—on a flotilla of boats. (In Herzog's original story, the opera was to be *Die Walküre*, done in full Teutonic regalia, perhaps to indulge



Klaus Kinski as Fitzcarraldo—triumphant in Iquitos after his opera

and close out the Wagnerian Romantic dream at the same time, as Hans Jürgen Syberberg has tried to do with his *Parsifal*. Perhaps Herzog thought better of the Wagner because the symbolism would have been just too thick.) The camera swoops around and among the boats, enacting its own lyric, as the visiting opera singers fill the harbor of Iquitos with the sensuous best of Western culture, and Fitzcarraldo basks in pure pleasure.

This is what Fitzcarraldo has learned from the Indians: the important thing is not to secure property (the rubber, the boat), but to recognize how small are these things in the eyes of the gods. And perhaps this is what Herzog, like a good American transcendentalist, has learned as well. Culture is not to be *founded* on real property, but rather *found* in the fugitive here-and-now moment when something wonderful is accomplished for the immediate delectation. This is the hedonist's version of T. S. Eliot's mystical "fitful moment in and out of time," where transcendence takes place. The adventurer's real reward isn't a permanent colonial implantation, however happily cultural, but an ephemeral gift

that floats and glimmers in the sun. This is neither chaos nor *Ordnung*, but the glory of the human scale. Far from being what Pauline Kael called a "token of a finish," Fitzcarraldo's epiphany is the point of the whole movie, the revelation that suggests that culture isn't a thing that has to be wrested from nature at the cost of blood. This is what sets *Fitzcarraldo* apart from *Aguirre*, and makes it more mature work.

From the beginning of his career, Herzog has been courting danger in alien territory, throwing the solitary self against the raw, remote elements: the occupied Greek countryside in *Signs of Life*, Africa in *Fata Morgana*, the Martinique volcano in *La Soufrière*, Peru in *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo*. Society, where it exists at all, is as demonic and unforgiving as Nature: its compulsions punish the innocent human spirit, as in *Heart of Glass*, *Kaspar Hauser*, and *Stroszek*. *Fitzcarraldo* stands for something else, a new turn for Herzog, in which society can admire something lovely, and culture can literally float on Nature. Granted, it is an idealized society in which

small children of the Amazon basin are trans-fixed by the recorded voice of Enrico Caruso, and respectable robber barons, prostitutes, and the rest of the town turn out *en masse* to behold the wonders of culture. Society, which was brutal and uncomprehending in Herzog's earlier work, now unites to understand and accept all. After the storms and chaos of the journey, after transgressing limits, Western man makes his peace with nature, culture, and alien society all at once. But Herzog's benign Utopia doesn't lord it over anyone else. After many years of imagining social claustrophobia and escape into cruel Nature, Herzog has extracted from disaster a lovely vision of rapprochement. At a grim moment in our culture, this is no small conquest.

—TODD GITLIN

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## Flower Films

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## SMITHEREENS

Produced and directed by Susan Seidelman. Script: Ron Nyswander and Peter Askins. Photography: Chirene El Khadem. Music: Glenn Mercer and Bill Million. New Line Cinema.

Susan Seidelman's *Smithereens* has become a postmodern classic, winning prizes not only at such film festivals as Cannes and Telluride but also turning into a hit at the box offices of alternative movie theaters in the Village as well as outside New York. Commenting on her film, Seidelman told an interviewer, “I wanted to people the film with characters who were products of the mass culture of the 1970's and 80's, kids who grew up on rock and roll” (*The New York Times*, December 26, 1982). The film, however, is not, as Seidelman seems to imply, a disinterested study of the contemporary scene although she does her best, by using a rather humorous and at times even affectionate idiom in her presentation of events and people, not to sound didactic and ideological. *Smithereen's* ostensible object is a portrayal of punk rock music and its subculture, but its actual subject matter, as she admits in the same interview, is the view of reality and moral vision lying behind the postmodern arts and held by their practitioners. “When people's values get perverted,” she observes, “the products they create reflect perverted values.” Her goal is thus to expose the prevailing perversions and, by doing so, help to restore a sense of moral health to the arts and community. The outcome is a frightened film that conceals its insecurities in jokes and ironic statements and projects a nostalgic moral universe rooted in the political conservatism that has swept Europe and the United States since the late seventies.

The realistic cinematography of the film is itself in a sense an aesthetic dramatization of its moral and political conservatism and its hankering after domesticity, common sense and other middle-class proprieties. This realism, however, like its ideological conservatism, is a rather sophisticated one that is not only aware of the experimentation of such directors as Godard, Truffaut and Fassbinder but is also quite knowledgeable about the narratological economies of such modes as cartoons. *Smithereens's* realism is, in other words, a post-experimental mimesis—a realism that acknowledges innovative and non-mimetic cinematography but, boldly and humorously,